

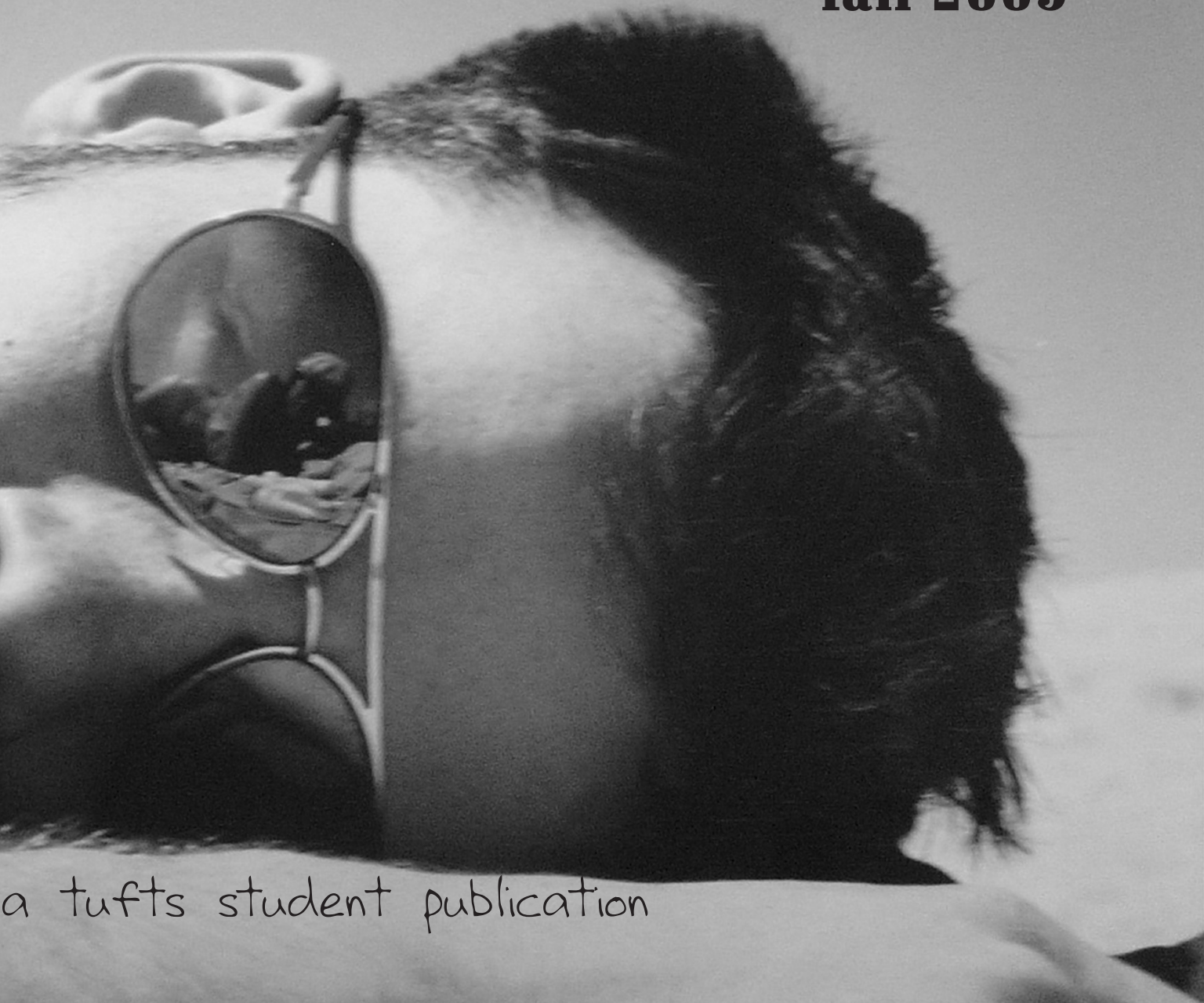
i
s
s
u
e

X
-
>



outbreath

fall 2005



a tufts student publication

outbreath

short stories and photography

fall 2005

xiv

co editors: samantha hilberth, sara Kaplan

web editor: steven schaffert

cover photography: chloe pinto

readers: carmel curtis, edith elliott, phillip lobo,
leonora mahler, jenna nissan, victoria petrosino,
meghan wallace

founding editor: cal levis

funded by: tufts community union

printed by: uni-graphics, inc.

webpage: ase.tufts.edu/outbreath

e-mail: out_breath@hotmail.com

editor's note

It was during the first semester of my freshman year that I began attending “Outbreath” meetings. Although interested in creative writing and excited at the prospect of participating in a college publication, I nervously sat toward the back. I listened to the more experienced staff members detail the history and importance of “Outbreath” and their commitment to this literary magazine. I did not anticipate that one day I would describe “Outbreath” to potential staff members and feel the very same passion.

This is my fifth semester as a member of the “Outbreath” staff and my second semester as an editor. Each semester, editors request submissions of new stories and photographs, face new challenges, and, most importantly, recruit new staff members with their own unique talents and perspectives. The result is usually an extraordinary group of dedicated individuals sharing not only the hard work but also the great joys as a new and distinctive issue of “Outbreath” is created. I am pleased to report that this semester has been no different.

I am thrilled to have had the privilege to be an “Outbreath” editor and while I am abroad I look forward to seeing how the new editors will shape the magazine.

Sara Kaplan
co-editor



a photo by chloe pinto

6. escapes

jenna nissan

14. fundamental

phillip lobo

25. vanity mirror

harrison levy

27. simply observation

jennifer dubois

37. winter break

jamie hartmann-boyce

44. about the authors



a photo by julie furbush

escapes

jenna nissan

There were nights when she would lay with her head on his stomach, watching his mouth form around the words that she could already hear vibrating deep within his belly. There was something comforting about her ear trembling against the words that came from within. Somehow, his voice was more real to her when she could hear it from his insides. It held more truth, more assurance. And when she sat alone on plane rides, long drives, in her own bed, she would press her palm to her ear and imagine the vibrations seeping through her eardrums, the rise and fall of her cheek with his breathing, the hollow noises of his stomach that filled with his voice.

When she was old enough to understand more than she thought she would for her age, the patterns that people followed began to disappoint her. It was always the same good girl falling in love with the same wrong boy, forgiving him time and time again when he cheated on her, lied to her, and made her believe she was worthless. It was always the same good boy she watched fall for the same wrong girl, who used affection as garnish for her image, strung him like a pendant about her neck, and then broke him when she was suddenly through. And it was always the trends she found comfort in that suddenly deviated from their path, forming a pattern of the reliable things always fading away.

When she and her best friend were in sixth grade, they spent their summer afternoons floating on their backs in her pool, letting the water settle around their ears and mute the sounds of the world they knew. They forgot the screeching tires at the stop sign in front of her house, the worried calls from her mother, and the drone of the heat on pavement somewhere just above their heads. After lazy afternoons of idle drifting, they would suddenly turn to each other and flop face-first back into the water. Then they would play, splashing and kicking and seeing who could hold their breath the longest under-water. They never spoke about the time they spent escaping the world together.

With towels wrapped tightly about their dripping bodies, they would clamber up the steps, leaving watery footprints behind as they leapt off the wooden deck to dig their toes into the earth. It was a race to the mighty oak at the back of the yard, and the winner claimed the best spot in the whole tree—the notch three branches up where you could lean your back up against the trunk and let your legs dangle. They believed in trees. Each girl had a name for every tree in her yard. There was Fussy, known for his difficult climbing branches; April, the spiny dogwood who bloomed pink every spring; Ash, with the black knots at the end of his branches; and Needlenose, the giant prickly pine who required careful climbing. The list went on and on, and each tree had its own personality, its own voice. Years later they would find their little-girl-journals under their beds, and read confessions of how they believed they were the only ones who could talk to trees, and they would look at each other with tarnished eyes—and laugh.

She chewed nervously at the end of her straw, as she always did, and found his eyes over the bubbles clinging to the side of her glass. He was gazing at her quizzically with his head tilted to the side like a confused cocker spaniel. She blushed faintly, and let the mangled straw slide from her lips as she smiled. “It tastes better that way,” she explained.

“The straw or the soda?” he asked, already laughing, his eyes bright and focused on her in a way she wasn’t used to.

“The soda. You get less of it when the straw’s chewed, and it tastes better.”

“Oh. Right. Of course,” he replied, only a slight hint of mockery in his voice.

“It’s just a bad habit.” She glanced down timidly and fiddled with the napkin dispenser.

He placed his hand on top of hers, and she felt her heart quicken. He pointed to his nails, which were choppy and cut short. “I know what you mean,” he said.

“Mrs. Cameron says we can’t chew pens anymore,” her best friend had told her, a destroyed pen cap dripping saliva hanging from the corner of her mouth.

“What! Why?” she exclaimed indignantly, removing her own pen cap from her mouth.

“Because she says it’s bad for our teeth. And that our parents asked her to please stop us when she saw us doing it.” She pouted and slumped down in her chair.

“But how can we just stop? That’s not fair! People chew on gum! What’s so different about that!”

“I don’t know,” she replied, sighing heavily. “But I’m not stopping.”

Katie had gotten her started chewing pens years ago. When they were in kindergarten, Katie always had a pen hanging out of her mouth, and she began to imitate her. Since then, she hadn’t been able to stop. She needed a new pen every week because the ends were always destroyed. Her parents and Katie’s parents alike were constantly nagging them to take things out of their mouth—“You don’t know where that’s been!” They were incessantly chewing and, at the end of the school day, often went home with pounding headaches.

After Katie brought the terrible news, Mrs. Cameron gave them pencils instead of pens every day, because neither liked the taste of wood. Katie was always making other plans. They began staging raids at 7-11s where they would sneak through the aisles and steal a handful of coffee straws. They hoarded the straws under their beds and chewed them every night before they went to sleep. When Mrs. Cameron praised them for being good, Katie winked and removed a mangled plastic bracelet from her mouth after she walked away. They chewed anything they could get their hands on: rubber bands, erasers, pendants on their jewelry. When they were older, and had outgrown most of these habits, there was one thing they never gave up: biting on straws.

He traced the outline of a cloud with his finger as he lay staring at the sky. “See, it’s a hippo,” he told her at last.

She shook her head at him. “You and your weird cloud shapes. Last week you thought Janet Jackson was in the sky.”

“She was! Come on. You know it looked like her.”

She rested her head on his chest and let his arm fold around her. The summer had found them always in parks, lying in the grass and trying to make sense out of the sky. He was more imaginative than her, and by the time August was through, he managed to find enough characters in the clouds to form a Ringling Brothers Circus. She stuck to basic shapes—stars, squares, circles—things that were actually *there*. But when she would take his hand and trace the cloud, he would insist time and time again that he couldn’t see it. “That’s not a star; that’s Zeus,” he’d inform her, and after some time, she’d smile and believe him.

“Can you see the old man?” Katie asked her, pointing to the ceiling fan.

“I don’t see his mouth. Just the eyes,” she responded, squinting in concentration.

Katie took her hand and traced it along a thin curve of the decorative pattern on the ceiling fan. “There,” she said. “That’s the lips, and that’s the mustache.”

“Oh! I see it now,” she said excitedly and giggled.

Katie flopped onto her back. “What you got?”

She searched the design for a shape they hadn’t picked out yet. Katie had gotten the fan put in her room a month ago, and at each sleep over, they’d lie on their backs and find shapes and animals and faces out of the flowered pattern. Katie taught her to have imagination. Her eyes worked hurriedly. She found the pig, the duck, their bus driver. “I see us!” she exclaimed at last.

“Us? Where?”

She took Katie’s hand and moved it in the air along the lines. “There’s you, on that side. See your curly hair. And I’m sitting next to you. I’m that smile. Right there. See us?”

Katie paused for a moment, her blue eyes scanning the ceiling. “I see us,” she said. “Our hair is made of flowers.”

“I love you,” he whispered, and she caught her breath, trembling a little. She lifted her face off his chest to look at him.

“No, you don’t,” she murmured, horrified by her response even as it escaped her lips.

He paused, but held her eyes. “Yeah, I do.”

In the silence that followed, he looked away quietly. She bit her bottom lip and lowered her head

slowly back to his chest, but in her nervousness she ended with her ear slightly above his stomach. They lay for a few moments like that before she looked up at him again. “I love you,” she heard from within his chest, and watched as his mouth formed around the words. She could hear his gentle breathing now as her cheek rose and fell, and an easy calm washed over her. His eyes never left hers.

“I love you too,” she whispered and a tear fell down her cheek.

“Katie,” she said, her voice rising over her best friend’s sobs. “Katie, it’s going to be okay.”

Katie was clinging to the oak tree, her red curls plastered to her face. Her eyes and nose were dripping as she sobbed deep from within her belly—big, heart-wrenching sobs. “It’s not going to be okay. Don’t tell me that.”

She reached an unsteady hand out to lay it on her friend’s arm. “It will be. I don’t know how, but it will be.” It was the first time in all her life she’d ever seen Katie cry.

“He’s taken everything from me! My dad, my home, everything. And now he wants to take the only place of comfort I have left. I won’t let him. I won’t let him.” Katie gripped the trunk tighter. Ash had always been her favorite tree.

“What should I tell him?” she asked uncertainly.

“That I’m not coming down. Not ever. Not until he promises he won’t cut him down for his stupid pool.” Katie’s parents had gotten divorced only a year ago, and at first, she managed all right. Things were different, of course. Her dad moved out and stopped taking her to baseball games. But it was over the following months that she aged. It was when she realized her mother had been with another man, when this man moved in and took over her household, when he struck her, silenced her, and stifled her make-believe. It was her mother’s silence, her father’s absence, her step-father’s violence. And now, they had finally broken her.

“What if I tell your mom? She wouldn’t let him do it, would she? She loves you, Katie. She’ll stop him.”

Katie turned to her, her eyes cold and glistening, and sneered. “She doesn’t love me,” she said.

He held her tucked under a blanket and brought a steaming mug to her lips. “Careful,” he said. “Don’t let it burn you.”

She smiled and took a careful sip. “I like how you say that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Most people say, ‘Careful, it’s hot.’” She rolled her eyes. “Of course it’s hot; I’m not stupid. They don’t call it hot chocolate for nothing. You said ‘Don’t let it burn you.’ It shows more concern.” She grinned widely.

“Oh,” he laughed, resting the mug on the coffee table. “Yeah, when I was little I burned

myself really bad once. On soup. Not just the whole you-can't-taste-anything-for-days feeling. I mean I had blisters all over my tongue. It was pretty scary.”

“Good job,” she teased him, and wriggled in the blankets for more warmth. His legs were strewn carelessly over hers, and she was resting easily against his shoulder. They were tangled like a giant heap of laundry that’s been sitting in the hamper for a week. The snow was falling outside and they watched it dance over the bleached ground, casting shadows. “What are you most afraid of?” she asked him seriously.

“What, like spiders and jellyfish, or like real fear?”

“Real fear.”

“Oh.” He paused, staring out the window for a moment. “My great-grandfather is ninety-five years old. And I always think how when he was born there was no TV, no computer, no cell-phones, not even cars really. I mean it’s scary to think how much he’s lived through. And my great-grandma died before I was born. When I see him on holidays, most of the time he just sort of sits there, you know? All alone. And if you try to talk to him he doesn’t really know what’s going on. But you can’t really blame him. Just think of how strange it’s got to be to live in this crazy world that’s nothing like the world you were born into. And not really having anyone. I’m scared of that. Of getting old, and that being my life one day.”

She nodded quietly, and gripped his hand tighter. He kissed her forehead and let his cheek lie on the top of her head for a moment. “What about you?”

“I’m afraid of change. Kind of like you, I guess. But more simple. Just change. Everything about it.”

“What about it scares you?” he questioned.

“Because people change. And then there’s nothing to believe in anymore.”

The last time she saw Katie, really saw her, she was tearing pages out of her journal. She was heavily coated in make-up, her eyes unrecognizably dark, her eyelashes coated in mascara. What she wore in make-up she sacrificed in clothes—a tiny belly shirt and jeans that were almost slipping off her hips. Her arms were lined with razor-marks and her vibrant curls were straightened and died blonde and hanging in her face.

“Katie, stop,” she pleaded with her, grabbing onto the journal and trying to pry it from her grasp. Her third boyfriend had just broken up with her, and sent her home with a black eye. She had come over to comfort her and the journal was sitting on the bed. Before she had gotten like this, they used to read it together and smile at the innocence reflected in those pages. It was filled with passages about trees and stuffed animals and adventures.

“I’m not that fucking girl anymore,” Katie yelled, wrenching pages from the seam and throwing them violently in the air. “I don’t want to read about it! I don’t want to know about it! She isn’t real!”

She began to cry and held fast to Katie's arms, trying to wrap them around her chest so she would stop thrashing. "She is real. She's you!" They fell backwards and landed with a thud on the wooden floor, gazing up at the ceiling fan. She looked up and found the image she had picked out of them, with flowers for hair, and purple curves for smiles. She raised her arm shakily and pointed upwards. "Do you see us?" she sobbed. "Do you see us?"

Katie shook her head, her vision blurred by tears. "I only see you."

For a long time after she and Katie stopped talking, she stopped believing in things. She trusted no one, always believing they were subject to change on a whim. She walked through her yard with her eyes averted, never wanting to recognize branches she had climbed as a child. In the summers, when swimming laps in her pool, she would sometimes stop and float on her back, and let the water drown out the sounds of the world. But she would always fall over into her own reflection, and crawl out of the pool slowly, her body shivering.

His fingers closed around hers under the blankets. "Sarah," he whispered.

She laid her cheek against his stomach and gazed up at him. "Yeah?"

"I won't change," he said, and it vibrated within his chest, her ear trembling.

She closed her eyes and nodded. "I know you won't, Sam." She wrapped her arms around him and listened carefully to his breathing, the steady rise and fall, rise and fall, rise and fall, that never faltered.



a photo by julie furbush

fundamental

phillip lobo

I began to see things not long after my seventeenth birthday. Seventeen has to be the single most minor of legal birthdays. At sixteen you can get a driver's license. At eighteen you can vote, serve and die for your country, be charged in a criminal court, and live as an independently operating adult. At twenty-one you can drink alcohol, legally at least.

At seventeen you can see an R-rated movie alone. Whoop-dee-fucking-doo.

I hear that at twenty-one, people often go on a ravenous bender, gleefully exercising their right to imbibe in a storm of excess. And good for them, really. Survive twenty-one years on this strange and dangerous earth, and I think you deserve to enjoy the rights you've managed to scrounge up. Seems fair to me.

At seventeen, however, I wasn't precisely drunk on the newly earned power to see films with the word 'fuck' in them. Not that I don't think the world of a well-placed profanity, but at the age of seventeen one usually has bigger concerns.

As it turns out, my concerns became rather considerable. As I said, I began to see things. First these things were minor. I realize it was the beginning of something only in retrospect: our chair is a shrouded figure, rigid with death? Okay, well maybe not something that grand, but you understand what I'm getting at. All the time we see illusions, tricks of the light, tricks of your mind. Something you don't quite know what it is, that gets translated at first into something it's not. At these moments, we're all a little crazy.

But it began to happen a lot more. A binder's edge sticking out of my backpack would be, for an instant, the angular face of some peeking creature. My pencil, sliding down the irritatingly sloped surface of a desk became a skittering centipede, and a blink later was back to normal. The frequency grew, but so slowly that, like that pain in your jaw, or your gradually declining test scores, you didn't ever take stock and wonder what exactly was wrong.

It was actually sort of pleasantly novel. I knew they would happen, and whilst they were often disorienting, there was nothing quite like seeing a dish of tater tots transform into a strangely colored nesting bird to liven up a trip though the cafeteria.

Actual worry was relegated to the occasional fit of anxiety while trying to get to sleep, anxiety that evaporated the next morning. That was the case, at least, until I began to see things not as they weren't, but that weren't there at all. Well, I should be more clear. Before, I saw things turn into other things. Next I just saw things. One particular thing, in fact.

* * * * *

It was in Mr. Peterson's math class, about as mundane a time and location as could possibly be imagined. Richard sat directly behind me, one of the advantages of having a friend whose last name is so close to one's own, so when the new girl walked in I immediately turned with a cocked eyebrow. She was short, with black hair cropped just above her shoulders, and with a face that was pretty in a somewhat severe way. She stuck out, as all new people do in the constrained world of the high school honors track.

"New girl?" I asked. Richard, who had been rummaging through his prodigiously sized and deeply disorganized backpack, looked up, and looked around.

"Where?" he asked. I jerked my head.

"Short black hair. White tank top."

Richard's eyes moved, wandering, then moving back to me.

"Uh... nope."

"No, seriously." I turned to point at her, but there was nothing to point at. The girl was gone. I looked back to Richard, and I must have looked very confused because he smirked that classic smirk of his.

This was the point where I became genuinely worried. And perhaps I had reason to. It didn't stop there. That was not the last time I saw the new girl. At lunch I saw her again, sitting alone, and she accidentally stumbled into my Spanish class before realizing she had to be somewhere else. Luckily for her, this was no great embarrassment. The only one who noticed was me.

This hallucination, a term I had unfortunately accepted as being appropriate, was not only strange because it wasn't a re-seeing of something, but also because it was always the same, in a way the others hadn't been. The toad, the backpack imp, the untencilpede, these things had come and gone and not returned. But the sternly pretty girl seemed to have a schedule of her own. She came into math, taking one of the empty seats, remaining visible for maybe ten seconds before disappearing. She walked past Spanish, heading to wherever she was heading, six minutes after fourth period began.

But it was at lunch that she stayed the longest. She brought her own, in brown paper bag, very classic, and she sat at the least occupied table for roughly five minutes before ceasing to be there at all. I actually timed it on the third day, for it was a daily occurrence, by looking up to see her, then checking the clock as soon as she was gone. Richard, who had just gotten a computer simulation of World War II and was going on at length about how he managed to take on both Axis and Allies by playing Thailand or something, didn't even notice my frequent sidelong glances, save one, prompting him to ask, "What? That eager to get to Spanish?"

"Naw, just... you know. Getting antsy," I lied.

After a week of sightings, my worry began to subside. I mean, it was actually more interesting than concerning. There was nothing threatening about the girl herself. This wasn't a Son of Sam thing. I wasn't insane, I reasoned, because I knew that she wasn't real. I am not a believer in ghosts, an idea that crossed my mind but was dismissed quickly. It was a hallucination, perhaps, but a single solitary hallucination a schizophrenic did not make. You could check the DSM-IV on that one.

But curiosity is a compelling force, especially in the mind bending tedium of Junior year, and whilst I was dead certain that the new girl was a very well constructed figment, I was interested in finding out just how well constructed.

And, well, she looked lonely at that table, all by herself.

Richard was out for Yom Kippur and the truth of the matter was that I had no one else to sit with either. The new girl was at her usual spot, eating what looked like a bagel with peanut butter. I steeled myself, got up from my usual spot, and moved over to her table, sitting down about half the bench away from her. She took no notice of me. This was suddenly rather awkward for me. This was not entirely what I had expected, though that was not hard, since I hadn't know what to expect. A revelation? Not really. For her to disappear? That would have been very disappointing.

I took a deep breath, feeling, ironically, more nervous than when dealing with real people, and turned to face her.

"Hey there," I said. Hell of a beginning.

"About time, Jason," she replied, not looking up at me, but rather taking a sip from a juice box, relic of grades past. I was speechless. It made sense, I reasoned, that she would know my name, but... Christ, I didn't know what the hell was going on. She saved me the worry of having to speak again, "You've kept me waiting a week. Not like you. You're usually much more inquisitive. And you think you know a person..." she looked up at me. She was smiling, something I hadn't seen her do yet. It was vaguely predatory.

"I... well, sorry about that," I said, "I'm not good with meeting new people."

She tilted her head, the smile morphing into a smirk, "I noticed. You just hang around with Richard," I felt a little defensive, likely because it was true, Richard was more or less my only real friend, "Though I'm not exactly new, you know."

"You're not?" I said.

Her eyes flicked over me, up and down. Her eyes were striking, a weird tawny shade I'd never seen before, with darker flecks, "You really have no idea what's going on, do you Jason?"

I nodded, dumbly. She grinned now, showing her teeth. Very predatory.

"I've gotta go and you've got class anyhow," she gave a little snort, "Far be it from me to rob you of your little dream. Guess I'll see you tomorrow," she lifted her hand, and gave a little wave.

And she was gone. Just gone. Blink, no more new girl. I was reeling. What was once novel

was now downright mysterious, and what was once curiosity was super-charged. I got very little sleep that night. I was thinking a mile a minute.

I wanted to talk to the new girl again. This was just so fucking strange. I had expected to have the upper hand. She was my hallucination after all. Her very existence relied on a distortion in my perception. But from the way she acted, I was the one who was out of the loop. I needed to know more. I couldn't stand that I had to wait until math tomorrow.

In the back of my mind, anxiety reared its head again. I had rationalized that I was still sane because I acknowledged the degree to which I was not. That seemed to make sense, that if I was a little crazy, it was lessened by the fact I was aware of it. But matters had changed. I had gone so far as to talk to my hallucination, and had become preoccupied by it. Part of me worried that I might somehow cross some unseen line.

But that was far too small a worry to overcome my sheer interest. I wasn't exactly deep in. Plenty of people have escapist fantasies. People altered their consciousness intentionally with drugs and alcohol all the damn time. It was only considered a real problem when it got in the way of your life. I was fine, I once again reasoned, because I was still firmly rooted in reality.

* * * * *

The next day, in math, she came in right on cue, and this time she shot me a smile. It was unnerving, both because of the predator's glint, and because before it had been as if she wasn't aware of me. It's a strange change, when someone you've watched, thinking you were watching him unbeknownst to him, finally looks back. The experience utterly changes.

After a moment's hesitation, I got up and made for the pencil sharpener, discreetly taking out the note I had written last restless night and tossing it towards the girl, sitting at her desk. I saw her catch it deftly in one hand, a quick and fluid motion. By the time I was done with the sharpener, she was gone, but the note was sitting on the chair. I palmed it.

I moved back to my desk, taking a seat, and pulling my binders out of my bag, creating a clutter that would, I hope, distract any lookers on from the note I unfolded and began to read. My original message was still there.

'I'm really confused, as you figured out. I think I'm just hallucinating you, which makes this really a fruitless venture, but I am still curious as hell, so I want to know: Who are you? How is it that you know my name, and why am I seeing you? I really have to know.'

I winced a little, upon re-reading this. It was utterly ridiculous. It was me writing to myself. In context, it really was sort of insane. Still, under what I had written, there was a response, scrawled in a fierce, forceful script:

‘I’m not sure where to start, Jason. I think we’ll have to talk at your lunch to really get things sorted out. Anything I say now will just make you ask more questions, if I know you as well as I think I do. Meet me outside the boy’s bathroom, near the courtyard. I think I can get there. And my name’s Raven.’

On one thing she was right. Even just that one answer left me with a thousand questions. I would have to wait ‘til lunch. The rest of math class was worse than usual in the face of my agitated excitement. Binomial theorems and asymptotes were never exactly riveting to me.

I told Richard I had to go to the bathroom, which was the truth of course, and left my lunch at the table, so that at least Richard’s lunch wouldn’t be without company. The girl, Raven as she had named herself, was waiting in the hall, leaning against the wall next to the water fountains. She gave me a smirk.

“You look ridiculous when you’re hurrying,” she said. It took me a little off guard, so I ignored it.

“Can we go somewhere where I’ll look less crazy talking to myself?” I asked. She lifted a brow.

“Huh? Oh, right. Okay. Where’d be good?”

“The stairwell.”

“Sure. Lead the way.”

So I did. I pushed through the doors to the nearest stairwell, holding it open for her, something that earned me a snort, and a brief ‘thanks’. We headed down to the bottom floor, where no high-schooler really would think of being during their lunch period.

“So, God, this is so weird,” I began.

“Not too,” she said, “You should be used to this sort of thing now.”

I frowned, “You keep acting as if you know me. How is that?”

“Because I do know you,” she answered, “Not from here. From after.”

“After?”

“Yup. We’re actually pretty well acquainted. You just made yourself forget.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course you don’t. That’s the real trouble. But that’s why I’m here.”

I felt the urge to correct her, to tell her that she was just a figment of my creative but off kilter psyche, but that seemed rude to me, and I couldn’t bring myself to be rude, even to a non-person.

“Okay, how do we know each other? And what do you mean by after?”

“We met in Japan,” Raven said, “Around...” she peered at me, “Two years from now. Maybe a little less. It was at a library, in the displays section. You were with Sarah then.”

I listened carefully. There had been a few moments before when I had felt a twinge of doubt, had almost been concerned that there was more to this than me going slightly mad, but this talk of places I’d never been and people I’d never met, not to mention something that was nothing short of time travel, pretty well cleared those doubts. This was crazy, but I wasn’t crazy enough to believe it. Still, it didn’t hurt to keep asking questions.

“So who’s this Sarah?”

“Sarah Townshend,” Raven answered, “She was watching over you. You were both on the run and on the hunt...” she paused, “I’ve got a feeling that if I explain any more it’s going to sound completely implausible, and that doesn’t help.”

I was already feeling more comfortable, oddly enough, now that this elaborate fantasy was being weaved for me. I felt back in control, in a strange way.

“I’ve gotta say, it’s already strange enough that you’re talking about time travel.”

“Time travel?” Raven echoed, giving me a ‘what the hell’ look, “What are you talking about?”

“Well, you said you came from two years in the future, so...”

“No, stupid!” she reached out and whapped me on the head. It hurt, which caused me to flinch for more than one reason. That she could touch me, or make me feel like I’d been touched, was worrying, “You’re so dense. Bah, this really isn’t my thing. Okay...” she scowled, an expression that actually looked far cuter on her than her smile did, “All of this, all you’re seeing, with the exception of myself, isn’t real.”

“What?”

“You’re dreaming all this, except for me. The only thing that’s real here is you and me. It’s all a big... hallucination.”

“I... huh?”

Raven rolled her eyes, “Amazing what two years will do, I guess,” she said to the heavens. “Look, I don’t have much time. You’ll see me at Spanish. Ask to excuse yourself, and we can talk more.”

“Right. Spanish. Where are you heading then anyways?”

“Latin,” Raven answered, “Where your buddy Richard is. He’s insufferable, how do you stand him?”

I smiled at this, “With great patience. He’s a good guy, even if he can be a pain.”

“Too bad what happened to him...” Raven said, and before I could even ask what that meant, she had disappeared.

* * * * *

“What did you say about Richard?” I asked her, less than half an hour later, in the hall of the language department. She was leaning against the wall again, arms folded over her chest. Her muscle was wiry and solid, like a lean cat’s.

“Thought that’d get you out here to see me,” Raven replied.

“I’m sorry, but this is creepy where it used to be interesting. I’m not sure I can keep doing this,” I said. This actually got a reaction out of her. Her eyes narrowed slightly, and she stood up from her lean.

“Look, we won’t waste any more time then,” she said, “Like I said, everything you’re seeing is a dream. It’s already happened. It’s gone and past and left behind. This is just a sort of memory.”

“No,” I answered, “You’re a hallucination, and you’re trying to talk me into a delusion that I’m not buying. I’m not crazy, dammit.”

“Jason,” Raven said, voice something of a growl now, “Calm the hell down, will you? Yelling at me isn’t helping anyone any.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m only yelling at myself. Look, I’m going to walk back into Spanish before anyone sees me talking to the wall, and I’d appreciate it if you’d not show up any more. I don’t have the time to go insane, thanks.” I thought about turning and storming away at this, but had to wait at least for her reply.

“Like hell,” she said, fixing me with those strange eyes, “I’m going to drag you out of this, kicking and screaming if I have to. Wouldn’t be the first time I hauled you by your ear.”

“Enough!” I said, voice rising and almost becoming an embarrassingly prepubescent squeak. I quickly lowered my voice, “Enough. Cut the shit. You only know me because I know me. There’s nothing else.”

“You don’t know shit, Jason Charles Malarky,” she hissed, “I’ll see you around,” and she turned before I could, storming down the hall towards Richard’s Latin class.

The next day I had math off, the sliding creative writing period taking its place. I was readying myself for lunch already. I felt I should ignore Raven, that I should get back to the usual schedule of my life and hope things would sort themselves out. There wasn’t any need to go any further than that. Raven had always waited for me to approach her. It stood to reason that, if I ignored her, she would have no effect on me.

Therefore, when lunch came, I sat down and, without even looking in the direction of Raven’s table, I began to chat with Richard. I finished my lunch quickly and efficiently, and waited until the bell before going to toss away by bags and tinfoil. I made for Spanish, and finally took just one glance towards Raven’s usual spot. Empty.

For some reason I felt more disappointed than relieved.

* * * * *

I kept this up, keeping my eyes purposely averted from wherever she might show up, for three whole days. It was remarkably effective. When I made sure I didn’t see her, it was as if she wasn’t there at all. I would occasionally get the urge to check, to see if somehow I’d banished the hallucination once and for all, but I fought the urge. This was working. I didn’t have to mess it up.

But it wasn’t working well enough. And I did mess it up. Richard was on a tangent about how good he was at meditation, something that drove me up the wall. Richard had a way of always

trying to establish a level of superiority. He's what I think of as a 'white tower nerd,' the nerd who, in reaction to being teased, decided to label most of the unfriendly world 'the unwashed masses' and/or 'the barbarian hordes.' This reminded me of Raven's comment, both about how I could tolerate him, and something about something that happened to him. I made the mistake of looking over at her spot.

She was there. Eating her bagel with cream cheese with a small scowl on her face, as if eating itself was a task requiring special attention. She was alone. I suddenly felt very, very bad like I had betrayed her somehow. It was too ugly a feeling to ignore.

"Um, dude?" I interrupted Richard mid-chatter.

"Yeah?"

"Gotta go to the bathroom."

"Thanks for informing me about your bowl and bladder state, dude," he said, making a face.

"Hey, I just have to wash my hands."

"Oh, right, Mr. OCD two-thousand and one."

"Be right back..." I said, getting up. I made for the stairs, and skirted near Raven as I did. I tapped her lightly on the shoulder as I passed. It was an odd sensation, feeling something that wasn't there. She was warm and soft, like a real person. She looked up at me, still scowling, but she nodded and followed me as I made my way to the stairwell entrance.

"I was about to give up on you," she said, as soon as we had some privacy. She sat down on the stairs, but I remained standing, looking down at her.

"What would that mean?" I asked, "That you'd disappear?"

"From here? Yeah," she said, "And you'd get to enjoy this for the week or so you've got left."

"What?" I was taken aback, to say the least.

"Look, I've decided not to explain things in any more detail than I have to, because it looks like it only freaks you out. Me, I can't understand why you don't think this mindfucking routine is insanity enough to make me seem plausible, but it's your dream, your rules." she sounded really cranky, but I wasn't feeling particularly sympathetic.

"No, tell me. I want to know. Why only a week?"

"That's as long as you'll live in this state, as long as your body will keep running. After that, you'll die."

"Oh Jesus. I tapped you because I felt bad for you. I don't have to do this you know. Christ, I probably shouldn't," I said, feeling my brows crease. Now it was a matter of death? I wanted to dismiss this very badly, but there was a growing pit of worry in my stomach.

"Look Jason, I don't have time for all this. I'll get right to the point," she turned to face me, "Whether you believe it or not, there is a real world beyond this weird little fantasy you've got going here. There is an outside, and it's in bad, bad trouble, and you are one of the only people that can help.

If you don't start believing in me, and in what I'm talking about, people will die, the world will sicken, and you won't get away, no matter how deep you go."

I was speechless for a moment, "What? How do you figure all this?"

"You know," Raven says, "You've made yourself forget, but you know. I can help you remember but you have to stop treating me like I'm just another part of you. You have to trust what I'm saying is true."

"I'm sorry," I said, shaking my head, "Really sorry, but I can't do this. These are classic delusions of grandeur, textbook paranoid schizophrenia. I'm just a teenager. I don't have the fate of the world on my shoulders, and what you're asking sounds like giving into fantasy."

"You think a world in peril is a fantasy?" Raven said, "You think it's a barrel full of monkeys fighting for survival every day of your life?" she waved to the dark stairwell, "This is a fantasy, your scheduled classes and packed lunches and warm beds at night. That's the unreality."

I lifted my hands, not so much fending her off as fending off her words. She spoke with such dire conviction, such certainty, and there was an undertone that neared resignation, something that bothered me in an essential way. Still.

"No way," I said, "This is just too nuts. I see this was a really bad idea."

Her gaze hardened, "And what if I'm not real, huh?" she said, "I tell you the world, the real world, is in danger. I tell you that you have to act, have to take a leap of faith, for the sake of everyone. Even if there is a minute chance I'm not lying, shouldn't you take it? Think of what's at stake. The world, against your trivial little life here."

"I have parents, I have friends and schoolmates," I answered, feeling myself prickle with irritation and, to a growing extent, fear, "If I go batshit, they'll suffer. And I know they're real, more than I know you are!"

"There are things lurking, Jason. There are dark monsters beneath the surface, and we are the only ones who can stop *him* from setting them free. We, Jason. I can't do this alone. You once told me you were ready to take that on, to do a hero's work. Dammit, Jason, you said you'd live up to your hero's name. If comfort and safety make a coward of a hero, maybe we're all better when placed in danger."

"Wait one fucking second!" I said, but she did not. She kept at it.

"The world, Jason. The world," Raven repeated, "That means your friends, schoolmates and family. Is your sanity so important, your dedication to what you can see and feel, that it is bigger than everyone and everything else? Because if it is, then everything's the fucking illusion, the only reality is all about you and what you can see and feel, and that's a pretty paltry reality, if you ask me."

"It's all I have!"

"No. It's already gone. Richard's gone, locked up in some institute after what *he* did to him.

Morse is dead because of the poison *he* whispered in Sarah's ear, and Sarah is dead because she realized that you and I were the only real hope, and sacrificed herself for that hope. And you stood tall through it all," she gave a strange half smile, half grimace, "Though you complained enough about it, you stood tall. And now look at you. You don't even make your own meals."

"I'm seven-fucking-teen! What do you want from me?"

"I'm through talking," Raven said, "I've told you all you need to know, all that will really help. You want to figure things out, you've got to make a decision."

"What decision would this be?"

"Tomorrow morning I'll be waiting on the hill, out in Blake's Park, the one that trees never grow on. If you're ready to follow me, to learn what's really going on, pack a lunch, a sleeping bag, and a change of clothes, and meet me there. If you don't show, if you go to school instead, I'll be gone. I'll leave you here, because I'll know you've given up. But if you meet me, I'll help you remember, because I'll know you believe enough to at least try."

"And what will happen? What will I see?"

"You'll see how it began, and you'll remember." And then she was gone.

After school I went straight to my comfortable bed and lay there, thinking. I played music, but couldn't listen to it. I tried to read and the words didn't make sense. I fiddled around with computer games, but my mind was far, far away.

I hardly slept that night, and when I did, I dreamed. I dreamed of Raven, the girl who might not be a girl at all, and she made me nervous. I dreamed of my school, endless and labyrinthine like it always seemed in dreams, and it made me frightened. I've never thought it was fair to be nervous or afraid in dreams. In a dream, nothing you do matters. You can be as bold or stupid, or even as evil as you want to, and no one is hurt. You can kiss the girl you adore and never have to worry about humiliation later. Why, then, do we still get held back in dreams? Maybe because we often don't know we're dreaming, and even when we do, it's so hard to break your well-worn habits and abandon your well-worn comforts.

I woke the next morning, out of my dream, and packed my bag for Blake's Park.



a photo by julie furbush

vanity mirror

harrison levy

With a towel wrapped around his waist and beads of water dripping down his back, Rob closed the door and turned on the stereo. He stood at the mirror styling his hair, a process that lasted eleven minutes. Rob habitually used so much gel that he sometimes worried he might lose his hair prematurely.

Rob meticulously rubbed some of the sticky substance into his hair. His arms looked a little more toned than usual. It had to be his new protein shake and work-out routine. The drink tasted terrible and it was exhausting working out every day, but looking this good made it all worth it. Rob moved away from the mirror to get a better view, kicking aside “Men’s Fitness” magazines as he stepped backwards. He raised his fists above his shoulders and examined his biceps. He then moved his hands towards his stomach, admiring his pecs and the faint outline of his six pack.

It was only as he stretched his hands above his head to flex his triceps that he saw his roommate in the mirror. Joe could not help but laugh at how ridiculous Rob looked. Rob stammered something about daily stretches, but Joe was laughing too hard to hear him.

Rob looked in the mirror. No sense in hiding it now, Rob thought. He turned sideways and examined his shoulders and back.



a photo by chloe pinto

simply observation

jessica dubois

Here are the things you should know about me: My name is Marlon, like the dead actor, not the fish. I am fat and uncharitable and this is not a story about any kind of redemption. It is a story about how I came to hate my neighbors even more than I already did.

I am not a bad man. At any rate, I am not much fatter and probably not much more uncharitable than the great Marlon Brando himself, and I'll bet no one gave him a hard time about anything when he was alive. This does not *bother* me. It is simply an observation.

"Nothing you say is ever simply an observation, Dad," my daughter Regan tells me. Regan is a girl and just out of college; she gets a lot of intellectual mileage out of the word 'ambiguity.' There was also a son, before you ask, but he doesn't feature much in this story.

I am a college professor at the local girls' college; my subject is the dying discipline of History. I have been teaching here since before teaching girls was considered worth the trouble, but now my school is rather competitive and well regarded and I get paid more than my less enlightened colleagues who preferred state universities in the sixties. The sweet justice of History at work!

So for the increasingly brief academic year, I teach. I am well suited to teaching because it is a lot like thinking, except out loud. Thinking is what I do much of the summers, including this one. My thinking is punctuated principally by three things. First, frequent visits from my wife Laura, who lives at the Holiday Inn off the freeway. She has been living there for the past seven years – which makes her my common-law ex-wife, if such a status exists. Second, episodes of intense attempts to acquire a long-term hobby – whittling, bird-watching, fishing, or anything else suitable for my age (which is probably not as old as you think) and my weight (which might be greater than you're imagining.) Third – and this may require a little explaining – every night, after the ten o'clock news, I spin my chair around and watch the little neighbor boy dance dance dance in silhouette.

This is not a pervy thing borne of sexual isolation; neither is it a tragic attempt to replace the aforementioned son who you will not be meeting in this story. It is entertainment, pure and simple, the *reductio ad absurdam* of my preoccupation with reality TV. There are two things which make the nightly shows so highly entertaining. First, the kid really can dance. He flutters around in ways that do not look entirely plausible on a human being. I don't care what my colleagues say; obviously *something* good has come from the young people watching MTV. The really entertaining part, however, comes from knowing the kid's disposition a little bit.

The kid is, comically, named Danny, although he'd be better suited to several full names instead

of one diminutive. Danny is the fourth youngest of five, according to latest estimates, but he has several rather interchangeable older sisters so it's hard to tell for sure. Danny has been to my house on several occasions: once, to bring me a pie when I broke my foot (too fat to trip over cats these days), once to borrow a flashlight before a storm that never materialized, and once to solemnly invite me to an Election Night party on his parents' behalf. (Living in a college town means that people have politics-related parties. Political parties, if you will. Ha ha. My students find me very funny.)

I do not know why Danny is the chosen emissary of his large family, instead of one of his more personable siblings. I imagine it is because he is the one most in need of regular non-corporal punishment, and Laura and I are not really fashionable enough to warrant impressing. Forcing the child into situations where he must be grudgingly polite must seem to his parents a good way to cultivate his social sensibility. It probably is not, but I don't care; his visits have provided the opportunity for me to understand the full hilarity of the whole dancing phenomenon.

The child, at age eleven or twelve, is best described as world-weary. He seems to have been born with chronic depression, instead of waiting around for hormones to produce it later. He positively shudders with the burdens of his small life. I am sure that videogames are somehow at fault.

So that's Danny, the nightly dancer, the most regularly featured character in my life. But maybe some words should be said about the other principal guest star: Laura. Laura and I had an unsuccessful marriage and are having an even less successful divorce. I am not interested in making any sweeping statements about why we married or divorced or why, for example, she is standing in my kitchen this very moment politely requesting that I turn my attention to the current condition of the top drawer of the refrigerator.

"For Christ's sake, Marlon, did you have like a mustard *fire bomb* in here? Was there a tragic coastal mustard spill? Should I alert Greenpeace?"

This is her way of pointing out that there is some mustard spilled along the inside of the refrigerator door. "Our" refrigerator door. This "our" she so casually throws around is basically the best explanation for her continued presence in my life; this refrigerator, she feels, is her refrigerator too, and she's not going to let a little thing like a divorce get in the way of monitoring its care and feeding. It's the house that draws her back, not me, I don't think.

"It's encrusted! It's become an aqueous *solution!* I'm going to need a power tool!" I retreat to the living room where the news is just beginning. I hope Laura goes home to the motel soon. I want to see how Danny's pop and locks are coming along, and this is the *exact* kind of thing that Laura would find exceptionally strange.

* * * * *

I am at school, holding “office hours.” Office hours are times when you are supposed to be sitting around available to your students, all of whom are expected to be interested in seeing you. No one ever comes to mine. I am hoping that this is because I am mean and forbidding and stinky, and not because my class is easy. Whatever the reason, I typically find myself alone during these “office hours,” reading Pierot’s *History of the French Revolution in Three Parts* and chuckling to myself out loud. So it’s quite the coup when the door opens – without a knock! – and in walks the daughter, Regan. The college graduate.

“Hello, my dear,” I say, shuffling some papers. “If you don’t mind waiting for just a moment, I’ll be right with you.” I gesture apologetically to the papers.

“Sure thing, Daddi-o,” Regan says. I do not know how I raised a nineteen-twenties era hipster. I was not even one of those myself.

While Regan sits in the waiting room, I take a moment to clear my office of whatever obvious contraband is lying about. I have six cans of Yoo-hoo chocolate beverage lined up on my desk. I have a framed picture of a chubby Regan at age eleven, wearing a plaid jumper and braids (probably one of the few pieces of evidence on this earth that Regan ever dressed like a girl and had hair like a human being). I have a copy of the *Wall Street Journal*. I whisk these items into the large bottom drawer of my filing cabinet and call for Regan to come in, which she does, offering me a kiss on the cheek and an article on macrobiotics in a single gesture.

“How *are* you, sweetheart? What a nice surprise.”

“Dad, I’m great. How are *you*?”

“Couldn’t be better in any possible universe! How’s James?”

“John’s fabulous, thanks for asking.”

My daughter has been living in sin with men of varying standards of hygiene since she was eighteen years old. This actually doesn’t bother me as much as you might think; teaching at a university has forced me into the moral apathy that we intellectuals like to call ‘progressivism.’ Laura, however, had some trouble with it, especially at the beginning. When Regan was just out of high school she moved in with an overweight 28-year-old computer programmer, whose level of oafishness has thankfully not been reproduced in any subsequent boyfriends. At the time, however, things looked pretty serious; Laura and Regan fought dramatically; the tragedy of forbidden love was much lamented and an elopement in Vegas was vaguely threatened. Regan and Laura didn’t speak for a time, and that time stretched out longer, ultimately, than the computer programmer’s presence in my daughter’s life. Everything thawed out in the end – before the holidays, mercifully – but my daughter does not like to ask Laura for favors anymore. Instead, she asks me.

“So, Dad,” Regan says, removing a pile of ungraded papers from the chair on the other side of my desk. “I had a thought.”

“What was that?”

“Dad, you’ve got to admit that I’ve been pretty low-maintenance lately. I haven’t asked for money in several months. I haven’t been arrested since that time in Austin, and even *you* admit that that was for a good cause.” Oh boy, I thought. Nothing that began like this could end well.

“What do you want?”

She blinked, unfazed, and removed her purple wool hat. Possibly this was intended as a gesture of respect, an uncharacteristic move for my daughter, which suggested the stakes here were high. “I’ve had the same job for almost a year. I haven’t gotten any new piercings in forever, and even some of my old ones have closed up.”

It was true that she was looking moderately more normal these days. Her hair, while definitely dyed red, was at least dyed a red that a person’s hair *could* be naturally. She was still wearing dungarees, but they were significantly less tattered than the last pair I remembered her wearing. No jewelry in alarming places. A bra, almost undeniably. Still, the question remained.

“What do you want?”

“And I’ve been thinking about you a lot lately. How you’re getting up there – “

“What!” As I believe I have made clear, I am not getting up *anywhere*. Just because I happen to enjoy the lifestyle of a World War I vet does not *make* me one.

“And how lonesome you must be in that big house, with all those appliances – “

I think I can see now where this is going, and it demands an immediate counter-response.

“Hardly! You know how I feel about people! And anyway, your mother comes over offering corrective commentary pretty much every day.”

“Well, mother had mentioned – “

“Since when do you and your mother have private talks?”

“She mentioned that you’ve been acting a little, well, off lately. Erratic behavior.”

“And what constitutes ‘erratic’ in her estimation?” This was really too much. It wasn’t the allegation of ‘erratic behavior’ that astounded me as much as the pretense that I’d ever exhibited any *other* kind of behavior. My wife and daughter had both lived with me longer than any of us would have liked; they’d both had the chance to get a sense of my personality and its more bizarre features. To suggest that I’d been chugging along in some sort of normal post-midlife routine – socializing with friends, attending faculty meetings, *jogging*, perhaps – and that this routine had now slipped off its rails and was hurdling headlong toward an isolated pre-senile dementia – well! It clearly belied some sort of plot on the part of my female relatives. And this upset me, because my wife and daughter – annoying and alarming as they could sometimes be – had never before struck me as the *ambush* type.

“Oh you know, staying inside all day watching reality TV. Letting mustard get encrusted all

over the refrigerator door. Gazing out the window listlessly every night after dinner.”

“How does she know what I do after dinner?”

“Apparently she’s been talking to some of the neighbors – “

“*What!*” Was there no end to this web of conspiracy?!

“Just out of concern, Dad. She just wanted to get a sense of what their take on the situation was.” And all of a sudden we have a ‘situation,’ and I know that this is a battle I can no longer win. I was outmatched from the start.

“Anyway,” Regan’s voice goes down a register, secretive, as if she’s talking *about* me instead of *to* me, “the neighbors have noticed that you sit in front of your window every night, sometimes for hours, just gazing. Don’t get defensive now. It’s simply an observation.”

“Nothing you say is ever simply an observation, my dear.”

Regan smiles sadly. “They say sometimes you *cheer*.”

An awkward position, this. Is it nuttier to be staring at nothing, or at the ten-year-old neighbor boy? Probably both could get you institutionalized. Just in different institutions.

“Well,” I venture, “how do they know I’m not looking at anything?”

“Daddy.” Regan is patient now. “There’s nothing going on outside. It’s just the Isaacs’ house, and I don’t think there’s anything scandalous enough going on there to hold your attention for so long.”

I remain silent.

She leans forward. “I mean, is there? Is there something scandalous going on there?”

“Nothing scandalous.”

She sighs. “I didn’t think so.” She perks up, remembering why she is here. “At any rate, either way, you seem to have a lot of time on your hands, and that house is such a liability. Mom can’t be coming over taking care of it forever. And I’m just in a place right now where I really feel like I’m capable of giving something *back* to you and Mom.

Giving back. We give back to depressed communities, failing alma maters. This is an insult.

“This is an insult.” I say. For a moment, she drops it.

“Look, I know I wasn’t the easiest kid to raise.” This is, and she knows it, an almost comic understatement. “I know you weren’t the kind of Dad who saw raising a child as some great life challenge, like Everest or something, to be approached with energy and humility or whatever. I know that I just sort of happened to you, and I guess I have a little more appreciation now for what that means.” She snaps back, catches herself and sits up a bit straighter. “So Mom and I have talked it over, and we really think it would work out best for everyone if I moved in with you.”

I glare.

“Just for a little while.”

I grimace.

“Just think about it, okay? Honestly, Dad, I’m not quite the nightmare you remember.”

“What about James?” I am really grasping at straws now.

“James and I are done,” Regan says, suddenly brusque and businesslike. “In fact, it’s looking like *men* and I are done. Men are entirely too insecure, if you ask me.”

“So why are you looking to move in with another one?”

Now she giggles, and for a moment I can squint through her and see the twelve year old with plaids and pleats. “Oh Daddy,” she says. “You’re not a man in the conventional sense.”

* * * * *

No, no. Absolutely not. Not a possibility. I have waited over half a century for my solitude. I have *earned* it. It is my prerogative now to squander the last quarter of my life as I see fit, in my own unique way, without hindrance from state or offspring. I know you’d like to see my sweet hippie daughter move in with me, and watch us learn to understand and appreciate each other in hilarious and touching ways. Not going to happen. I watch reality TV; I don’t live it. Out of the question.

I am sitting at the desk in my study, half-heartedly attempting to fashion a miniature boat to go inside a bottle. Laura got me a kit for my last birthday. Previous birthday presents from Laura have included: a box set of National Geographic videos, each featuring different common suburban songbirds and offering tips for their recognition and appreciation; a Weight Watcher’s one-year membership; a Chia Herb Garden (from the makers of Chia Pet); and a 1-2-3 Teach Yourself Spanish textbook and audio tape. Ay carumba!

The key to the ship in the bottle, by the way, is that you make the ship first, in a collapsed state, and then erect it within the bottle through a tiny system of levers. Say what you will about me, I know how to have a good time.

Thanksgiving is this week, which means that all the girls have gone home for ten days. Ten days! In my youth, we had the afternoon off for Thanksgiving dinner, and half of the afternoon was spent chopping logs. The other half was spent eating turnips. The rest was spent in quiet reflection and prayer. I’d like to spend this Thanksgiving grading papers harshly. Maybe writing sarcastic comments in the margins. In all likelihood, however, this Thanksgiving will be an exercise in bullet-dodging – the bullet being the specter of my daughter Regan’s conquest of my home and privacy, and the Vietcong, in this case, being Regan and her mother. I am not expecting any rounds of fire for several days though, since today is a Tuesday and Thanksgiving is, intractably and senselessly, always a Thursday. Which is why I’m startled, unprepared, and wearing civvies – specifically, a most unflattering undershirt and plaid pajama bottoms – when the doorbell rings.

My initial reaction is to, of course, hide. There is nothing that I want from the world, and if the world wants something from me, I'd just as soon not know about it. Laura hasn't bothered with the doorbell since before we were married and divorced; Latter-Day Saints and Mary Kay ladies have failed to save me from either apostasy or dry skin; the neighbors seem, finally, to know better. It could only be Regan, looking to take advantage of some holiday spirit she imagines might have seized me in my confused and staggering old age, the true meaning of Thanksgiving and what-have-you. Well, she'll have to try harder than that. I am a professor of history and know that there is *no* true meaning of Thanksgiving. Perhaps she's brought blankets full of smallpox to weaken me while she invades my property. Better not to answer the door.

The doorbell, however, is refusing to be ignored. The ringing has morphed into one long, uncomfortably loud tone; it feels like a fire drill and it is hard to build a ship in a bottle during a fire drill. Furthermore, there is now shouting.

"Daddy, we know you're in there."

'We.' She has back-up.

"Your car's in the driveway.

I say nothing.

"What, you want us to think you *walked* somewhere?" That would be Laura. Superb. A double threat.

"We come in peace," says my daughter.

"We come with baked goods," says my wife.

"Laura, you have a *key*," I shout.

"I have *manners*," she shouts back. I snort. This doesn't even merit contradiction. "I also have my hands full." The truth is revealed. "Open the goddamn door," she says.

"What is the nature of these baked goods?" I ask, opening the goddamn door. "What are your demands? What the hell is this?"

My daughter is wearing what I think might be traditional Pilgrim dress, or her closest approximation: a hat with a buckle on it, an old apron of Laura's, and – rather inexplicably – a cape. Laura is not dressed any worse than usual. They each are carrying several grocery bags, of which I relieve them. Who ever said chivalry was dead? The grocery bags look to be from an organic grocery store; still, I detect dessert-type things towards the bottom, making me marginally less regretful that I opened the door.

"It's a new Thanksgiving tradition!" says Regan.

"It's an intervention!" says Laura.

"God help me," I say.

"It's a pre-Thanksgiving family luncheon," says Regan. "The first annual such luncheon."

“Oh, no, it’s not,” I counter. “This is cheating. You’re two days early. Go away. Come back Thursday.”

“Can’t,” says Laura, unloading groceries.

“Got a date,” says Regan.

“Got somewhere to be,” says Laura.

“Since when do you have *anywhere* else to be?” I say.

“Mom’s met a guy,” says Regan.

“Well, God help *him* too, then. And his refrigerator.”

“Kevin’s refrigerator is in impeccable shape Marlon, and won’t need my assistance,” says Laura. Kevin. The ‘guy’ Laura’s met. There are no ‘Kevin’s’ of my generation; neither are there ‘guys.’ What perverse May-December entanglement is this, I wonder. One shudders to think. Poor ‘Kevin’ is probably a paid male escort. Or an illegal looking to marry for citizenship. Or a con artist swindling unsuspecting old ladies of their hard-earned lifelong savings. Or a homosexual politician marrying for convenience. “I’m sure you and Kevin’s refrigerator will be very happy together,” I say.

“I like to think so,” Laura says brightly. “Why don’t you cut some squash?”

I oblige, muttering vaguely. There is silent slicing for several moments before Regan says, “You know, Dad, I’ve been thinking.”

“Oh, is that why we’re celebrating?” I say.

“And I think you were right about me not moving in with you.”

“What?”

“Yeah, you were right.”

“Oh.”

“We don’t really get along.”

“Not usually, no.”

“And it was pretty presumptuous of me to ask.”

“Enormously.”

“And things didn’t exactly go so well when you lived with J.D.”

There she goes again with the understatement. Don’t ask. I’ve run out of squash to slice and don’t know what else to be doing in the kitchen, so I take a paper towel and pretend to clean around the stove. “You’re moving in with the new fellow, aren’t you?” I say.

“‘Moving in’ is a strong way of putting it.”

“You are sleeping with him in lieu of paying rent elsewhere.”

“I keep a few things over there.”

“Well, good luck and godspeed to both of you. And to your mother. And to Kevin. And to all God’s children everywhere. I’ll be in the living room. Celebrity Poker’s on at seven.”

Thanksgiving Day, mercifully, is quiet. A ceasefire. I have a stack of sophomoric and puerile history papers to grade, a platter of luncheon meats to consume, and a marathon session of *Family Feud* to enjoy. I have, in other words, much to be thankful for.

Shockingly, I have gone the entire day unmolested. I rather thought the neighbors might have sent over a quiche via the dour neighborhood ballerino, Danny. In the modern age, there is – or should be – an unspoken acknowledgement that just because two families happen to share the same neighborhood or fence doesn't mean that they have anything substantial to talk about. These neighbors always seemed to think it cute and folksy and whimsical to ignore these conventions – no, to self-consciously demolish them – by launching their offspring at me, especially on national holidays. Last Thanksgiving, on the way to get the paper, I almost tripped over the boy, who was standing on the doorstep, viciously clutching a pecan tart. “Here,” he'd said. “Like you need it.”

Maybe the neighbors have found a new victim for their attentions – somebody even older, more unkempt, more housebound, more deserving of charity.

Maybe they've sent that obviously troubled boy to military school, at long last.

Maybe they've moved, for all I know or care.

At any rate, it's a good thing, because I am in no mood for pastries or pity. Regan is spending the day with the most recent in the line of louts who'd be lucky to marry her but likely will not; Laura has tragically succumbed to some post-menopausal hysteria in an effort to regain her lost youth. I am here, sanity intact. Refrigerator unapologetically dirty. Remote control ready. In Pierot's *History*, the French Revolution is always in full swing. I am as alone as I have ever hoped to be.

Naturally, this does not bother me. It is simply an observation.



a photo by julie furbush

winter break

jamie hartmann-boyce

I'm ten and I am getting out of the car I drove here. I'm not actually ten but I might as well be because I feel ten, even though my hair is shorter now and I've lost my baby fat and I'm wearing makeup. Max is convinced that the pavement on the sidewalk is new and wet, and that our footprints are being recorded in time as we step out of the car. I can't tell because it's dark and the ground doesn't really feel solid either way. I try to explain to him that it probably isn't wet cement because it's New Year's Eve in Massachusetts and it's almost midnight and why would they repave the sidewalk in front of Emma's house now? But the more I walk on it the more confused I get and I'm starting to think it would be really amazing to have our footprints eternalized outside Emma's house. I start envisioning the strip of Hollywood that I've never been to, where all those hands and signatures have hardened. I'm starting to feel like we might be confused and we might not actually be stoned college students back on winter break. Maybe we're American icons, Hollywood nobility, and that makes me excited. But then Max is quiet for a while and I look over but forget it's dark so I can't see him. There aren't many street lights in small towns. I ask him what he's doing and he tells me he is placing his hands in the wet cement. He's wondering how much detail the cement will take from him, and if maybe his fingerprints will be there too. Then I get a little sad and a little scared, and I think maybe I don't want to be American royalty and that anonymity has its benefits.

I tell him we should go inside because it's cold and it's a party and I told Anna we were on our way. I pretend to be excited to see all the kids I haven't seen in a while. I pretend to be excited to see Anna, which I should be, because she's my best friend and has been since back before I can really remember. Max begs me to hold on a second because he wants to leave more imprints and then we get in a fight. I am becoming increasingly more sure this can't be wet cement, or at least I'm telling myself that, because I really don't want my imprint to be here. I don't want this to be the most permanent record of me. This is not where I am to be immortalized. It's so dark though that I can't prove him wrong, and I'm wondering if it would be better to be immortalized here than not to be immortalized at all, so I kneel down and grab a handful of the ground and tell Max that if we get inside the house and it turns out it's wet cement, we can go back outside, but it feels a lot like dirt to me.

When we get inside I'm ten, or actually more like fifteen now. Anna is walking up the stairs dressed up like Mrs. Hannigan, our assistant principal, who we've always suspected spends time reading vulgar romance novels, and maybe snorting something too. This is meant to be a costume

party but Anna wouldn't look like herself either way. Now she never looks like Anna and always like Depression, capital D. I never know how much of it is a costume. I am a peacock because I am wearing a green shirt and my grandmother's antique purple beads are wrapped around my neck and hang off me like I am a chandelier. Anna brought me the mask. It has feathers and it makes me nervous just because I'm afraid already, and I don't want my vision obstructed. Anna is shrinking inside of Salvation Army satin and her eyes are looking out at me through a painting, but it's her face. A bright pink strap is falling off her white shoulder and I move my hand to push it up, but she slaps it away and says, "It's part of the outfit." I brush the dirt into Emma's sink and watch as the hot water moves the particles off my palms like I'm the side of a mountain and this is a landslide.

This time I actually am ten. I am having a sleepover at Anna's house. Her parents are asleep and it's snowing. Her older sister just taught us how to play Old Maid but now her older sister has left and it's just the two of us. I look out the window and it's snowing harder than I thought it was. Let's go outside in it, she says, and this is shocking because I didn't bring my boots. And I guess also because it's late, and I am hyper aware of how cliché it is that I'm ten and I'm sneaking out of the house with my best friend.

Looking back I think maybe this was the beginning of her being unsatisfied. Maybe it wasn't a normal sort of rebellion. Maybe it was desperate. Re-writing it I ask, "Why is staying inside and watching a movie or listening to your dad snore or falling asleep while we pretend we're awake not enough? Are you unhappy?"

"I don't know, Anna," I say in real life. "It's pretty cold out."

Anna giggles and says I never want to do anything. I think that maybe that's why I'm fat, because I'm not adventurous. She says it will be exciting and we won't be caught. We are ten now. After all, these are the double digits.

I miss being nine years old.

"Remember the first time I slept over your house and then the next morning how we went on a walk around your neighborhood?" I ask. "And it was so gross because there was a turtle that got hit by a car and its insides were all stretched out and they looked like a mix between a melted Stretch Armstrong and dried lemon jell-o." It's a true story.

"I don't think they make lemon jell-o," she says, so we leave the house and she has on turquoise boots with sequins, but my sneakers are already wet by the time we make it out the driveway.

When 2002 begins I am ageless sitting on a couch in Emma's basement. Max is drinking champagne and kissing someone. Anna's soy milk and Kahlua is sitting next to me and it's clumpy and looks kind of like a swamp in a plastic cup. Anna is also sitting next to me. I think. She keeps

on touching the Salvation Army satin like she's afraid the strap is going to crawl back up her arm against her will and her outfit will be ruined. "Oh God," she says, "I can't live another year."

I say, Anna, this is too cliché of us. If you're going to be suicidal don't announce it. Pull your fucking dress strap up. Then I reach over and start pulling individual strands out of her Mrs. Hannigan updo. At first I do it because if she wants to be a painting then I want to be a part of her creation, and then I do it because by accident I pull one too hard, and it makes a little pop, and she grimaces. And then I do it again, maybe not by accident this time, and she grimaces again. And the third time I do it definitely isn't an accident. I am drunk off of having an impact on her for the first time in a while. But then she gets bored.

I'm in the back of a car and the heat is on too high. Max is driving, Anna is in the passenger seat. Me and my two best friends from high school. It is mid afternoon but it's also the end of afternoon because it is the winter. Though it's still bright out you can tell it's about to get dark, like particles of night are already being held up by the air, but they are going to get heavier and heavier and they will fall and it will be dark by 4:30. And everything will look very clean, because that's what happens on winter nights in Western Massachusetts.

My breath is blowing against the windowpane and I'm dragging the pad of my finger across the steam spot. I don't like the way it looks so I start trying to rub it all off but the car is all steamed up. And I rub and I rub and I rub, but still there are these little white lines on either side of where my flesh contacted the pane. They are like the sides of a road, or river banks.

I'm wondering if I pull on Anna's hair some more if I will have an impact. Or if there's something else I can do to make this all change. I'm thinking about how I used to play the piano. I had a teacher whose hair looked like dried grass and who smelled like cigarettes and perfume. For years, Mrs. Joyce would come to my house once a week for our lessons. Our major problem was that she hated the sound of fingernails on smooth white piano keys and I refused to cut my nails. In the middle of a piece she would pick up my hand and examine it, like it was a cultural relic. Then this line would draw itself from the top of her forehead, where her hair met her skin, and drip down between her eyebrows, like someone was softly pressing a butter knife into the flesh above her nose and before her forehead. The butter knife phenomenon. Not all that different from the hair pulling phenomenon, I don't think. Me grasping for reactions.

"Why don't you just cut your nails?" my mom would ask, and she would sigh.

For a while I thought I didn't cut them because I was 13 and liked having long nails painted with clear nail polish. For a while I thought I did it because I didn't like playing the piano, or at least not for Mrs. Joyce, and this was some form of rebellion. And for a while I thought I did it because I didn't like having to go into my parents' bathroom to cut my nails and looking in the mirror, standing on the quiet wood tile floors.

I stopped with the mirror theory when I came to believe I did it for the butter knife phenomenon. I liked watching that line appear.

But now I'm thinking about it a lot, in the back of this overheated car, with Anna up front talking about something. I think about how she feels walls are closing in on her all the time, and the medications they're giving her aren't helping.

I'm thinking that maybe I'm not right, that the butter knife was an added bonus, and that maybe what I liked all along was the sound of my nails hitting the keys almost at the same time as the note came out, except if you listened closely it was staggered. The clicking of my nails always came first, and then the note, which is what everyone was waiting for. But at least it was clear that the touch of my fingers was having an impact.

We spend a lot of our time in parking lots around here. There's this parking lot in the center of town that's long and skinny and fills the space between a row of stores and a graveyard. It's where we always park because it's free and you never get towed, so we spend a lot of time there, getting in cars, getting out of them. Sometimes we just sit in that parking lot, in our cars, or sitting on top of them, or halfway in the door, for hours, keys in hand, because we keep on having things to say to each other, or because we aren't ready to leave yet, or maybe because we don't have anywhere to go. Maybe we don't have anything to say and maybe we're ready to leave and maybe we have places to go but for some reason we're stuck. We can't move. This one time a friend of ours screamed. He just stood in the parking lot and screamed. No one came to see what was happening, because this is a small town and nothing ever happens. And we, well, we stood there and watched and didn't say anything. Anna joined him at one point I think. They were both screaming. At this point I was wondering if this was what all 17 year olds do, and if I should be doing it, and if it was wrong that I just kind of wanted to go home or something.

We are in that parking lot right now. "No one is going to tell me I can't kill myself," she says. "That's what pisses me off, that people tell me I can't. Of course I can if I want to. Don't tell me I'm not capable."

I think I kind of grunt, because what do you say to that, and how many people has she told that to. And then I think about how funny it is that in all of Anna's toddler pictures, some of which I'm also in, she's pointing at the camera. She says she has always been unhappy but I don't believe it, because she was smiling when she was pointing at the camera, and I think she was too young to be pretending to be happy then. I think it's the age, and the transition, and the fact we're all off at college and she's "figuring things out."

'Figuring things out' means throwing everything out of her room because it overwhelms her.

And then Anna shrieks, because we're parked in front of the wall of the cemetery, and a mouse just crawled out from between two of the stones, and Anna has nightmares about mice. I tell her that it's okay because we're in the car.

I think I'm ready not to be on 'winter break' anymore.

That time when we snuck out of her house, when we were ten, it *was* cliché. She lives near town, so we went into the middle of town, which doesn't consist of much. Since it was snowing really hard and it was late at night and it's a small town the only things happening were the snowplows, and they weren't happening anywhere near us. It was snowing really hard, like up to our knees. It made walking really difficult, especially if you were the one without the sequined boots. We weren't really talking. There is one big intersection in town. It's badly designed so it needs a lot of complicated traffic lights.

Snow takes light and spreads it out and suspends it, and when the traffic lights changed the whole intersection changed, from a green tinted emptiness to a yellow tinted emptiness, to a red one. We waited for it to be tinted green again and then Anna took my hand and we stepped off the curb. And we just stood, right in the middle of the intersection. I guess we were looking up. I think everyone I ever knew before I left home has driven through that intersection. It's kind of like the center of activity in this town, because you have to go through it to get anywhere. But right then it was totally empty, and totally quiet, and I couldn't see anything except traces of color. There was nothing except these tall lonely lights, and all this snow, and me in my wet sneakers, mourning the single digits. I guess Anna was there too, but I couldn't see her because of the snow, or hear her because of the snow. In fact, she was definitely there, because what I do remember is that I kept on wishing for a snowplow to come. I wanted something to come and make her move from that spot, shake her out of it. I kept on wishing a snowplow would sneak up on us, and we wouldn't see it or hear it until all at once the lights broke through the snow barrier. There would be honking or sirens or something. A lot of puncturing yellow rays of light. Maybe a squeak of brakes, an angry driver. Lots of flashing. There would be a moment of face off, us frozen, sunk almost halfway deep in snow, two snow sculptures of ten-year-old girls you almost wouldn't see if it wasn't for those yellow lights. The angry shovel of the snowplow, maybe a dark grill. There would be that second of face off. And we would *have* to move.

It didn't happen that way. I think eventually I said my feet were cold and wet. I got upset by the fact that as we walked down this empty white road, we left footprints. Those footprints, I remember them really upsetting me. I remember craning my neck back over my shoulder so that maybe I could watch each one at the moment it was created. I don't think it's the fact we left footprints that upset me, but maybe that since the snow was so high and I was so tired the tracks were totally wrong. They weren't perfect sneaker soles, one after another. They were indecipherable. They looked like someone dragged something through the intersection and down the road. And then the thing was, they didn't even look like that, 'cause the snow was still falling really, really hard, and the holes were being filled in.

On the drive from my house to Anna's house there's this place we call the end of the earth. We call it the end of the earth because it's just the street you're driving on and then fields if you look in a particular direction. All it really is is the horizon; it looks like the world just drops off after that line. The end of the earth is at its best right now, during the beginning of a winter sunset, when most of the sun is still above that line so it's hot and bright and makes everything around it seem even more cold and dull, but some of it has already fallen off the side. I'm driving so slowly that I'm stopped, but it doesn't matter because the road is empty. I dropped Anna off at her house and I'm driving home because my father is making chili tonight and they're complaining I'm not home very much even when I'm home on winter break.

The heat is on really high and I turn on Elton John, "Tiny Dancer," because what the fuck, I am cliché and this is cliché. I debate rolling down the window so I can get a clear crisp view of the end of the earth, but I kind of like what the light is doing to the glass. It's hitting the glass before it hits me, so by the time the light from the sun gets to me it isn't as sharp, it's been slowed down a bit.

When I get home my mom asks me how Anna is. I tell her, oh, you know, the same. She says it's just such a shame. And her poor parents.

My dad made guacamole, which makes me happy, and there's a fire, which makes me even happier. We haven't thrown the Christmas tree down in the gully behind our house yet with all of the other Christmas trees from all the other years, so I plug in the lights and sit down on the couch near the fire and look at the tree, all lit up.

"You've always been so sentimental," my mom says.



a photo by thuy le

about the authors

Jenna Nissan is a freshman majoring in English. She spends much of her time winning at Mariokart under her alterego, Yoshi. She rocks some good rhymes as she enjoys listening to music and jamming along on her guitar. There is not a time that she will ever refuse a mozzarella stick. Her favorite color is red.

Phillip Lobo is proud to have one of his stories printed in Outbreath this semester, after squeezing in just under the line last time. He's currently a sophomore, but don't bother to ask him directions because he's likely more lost than the freshmen, trust me.

Harrison Levy didn't even like creative writing until he said he did at an interview. It's funny, really. He didn't get the job, but he did develop an interest in creative writing - that has to count for something, right? And by the way, there's nothing wrong with flexing in the mirror...not that he does...

Jennifer DuBois is a senior majoring in political science and philosophy. Her plans for next year include disillusionment, unemployment, and an inevitable career in consulting, whatever that is. In her spare time, she enjoys muffins.

Jamie Hartmann-Boyce is a senior. She enjoys grammar, choose-your-own-adventure, and everything to do with mid-nineties ice-skating culture. Inspirations include, among others, Tonya Harding, Freed Willy, Crammit the Frog, Axl Rose, and The Nose that Knows.